

AN INQUIRY INTO IGNORANCE: A JIHĀDĪ-SALAFĪ DEBATE ON *JAHL* AS AN OBSTACLE TO *TAKFĪR*

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Introduction

If one were to search the word “takfiri” on Google and read some of the material that turns up, one would get the impression that “takfiris” are particularly zealous and single-minded Muslims who rather randomly accuse their fellow believers of being apostates (*murtaddūn*) and infidels (*kuffār*) in order to fight them through jihad.¹ To a lesser extent, this description can also be found in the writings of some Western scholars of Islam.² These impressions are certainly not entirely inaccurate. The practice of *takfir*—the accusation against other Muslims that they are guilty of unbelief (*kufr*)³ and, as a result, should be condemned as infidels (and perhaps even be killed)—was (and is) a major part of the ideological justification for armed attacks against other

¹ One website, for example, speaks of the Jordanian-British radical scholar Abū Qatāda al-Filastīnī as “a misguided, bloodthirsty takfiri”. The article accuses him and like-minded people of being only interested in “killing Muslims whom they deem apostates” and of “excommunicat[ing] whole Muslim societies” which “leads to the justification of the killing of innocent men, women and children”. See www.islamagainstextremism.com/articles/bqael-abu-qatada---a-misguided-bloodthirsty-takfiri.cfm (accessed 28 October, 2009). Although there have indeed been instances in Algeria in the 1990s when entire villages were labelled as apostates and subsequently killed by radical Muslims, these practices were roundly condemned by Islamists and radical Muslims around the world. It would therefore be an exaggeration to equate the actions of a small number of extremely radical people with those of a much larger group who “only” excommunicate and fight their own regimes. Although this also often leads to bloodshed, it is a far cry from the kind of random killing described above.

² See for example Hans Jansen, “Takfir”, *Trouw*, 9 July 2005 (in Dutch, www.trouw.nl/krantenarchief/2005/07/09/2330396/Takfir.html?all=true).

³ As Izutsu points out, the root of the term *kufr* (*k-f-r*) is said to have had the basic meaning of “to cover” and came to be associated with “covering” or “consciously ignoring” benefits one received and hence may be interpreted as “being ungrateful”. In Islamic tradition, the word seems to have been taken as denoting ingratitude towards the benefits that God bestowed upon people or, more simply, a rejection of God’s religion of Islam. Since a person who rejects Islam can be seen as an unbeliever (*kāfir*), *kufr* therefore took on the meaning of “rejecting Islam” or “unbelief”. It is also as such that the term is used in the Qur’ān. See Toshihiko Izutsu, *Ethico-religious concepts in the Qur’ān*, Montreal, 1966, 119–55, especially 119–38.

Muslims by several radical Islamist groups in countries such as Egypt⁴ and Algeria.⁵ The legitimising role of *takfir* in radical Islamists' attacks against Muslim soldiers, politicians and—in some cases—even civilians is therefore not in doubt. However, while it appears that modern-day radical Muslims apply *takfir* more easily than the classical scholars of Islam (*'ulamā'*),⁶ the idea that they do this randomly or even casually ignores the highly detailed debates about this issue among radical scholars. This paper focuses on one such debate.

Among the issues that feature in the debates⁷ on *takfir* between radical Muslim scholars is the question of whether ignorance (*jahl*) of the sinfulness of an act of *kufr* can be used as an excuse (*'udhr*) for committing it and, subsequently, as an objection (*māni'*) or obstacle (*āriḍ*) for others to apply *takfir* to that particular sinner. The idea behind this is that God will not hold a person responsible for acts that he or she did not realise were sinful and human beings should therefore also not condemn such a person.⁸ Although some authors have questioned

⁴ See for example Mohammed Hafez, *Why Muslims rebel: Repression and resistance in the Islamic world*, Boulder, Col. & London, 2003, 173–85; Gilles Kepel, *Muslim extremism in Egypt: The Prophet and the pharaoh* (translation by Jon Rothschild), Berkeley & Los Angeles, 2003 [1984], 72–8; Roel Meijer, "Commanding right and forbidding wrong as a principle of social action: The case of the Egyptian al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya", in: Roel Meijer (ed.), *Global Salafism: Islam's new religious movement*, London, 2009, 207–17. For an extensive analysis and translation of the ideological justification of the assassins of Egyptian President Anwar al-Sādāt, see Johannes J. G. Jansen, *The neglected duty: The creed of Sadat's assassins and Islamic resurgence in the Middle East*, New York & London, 1986, 1–34, 159–234.

⁵ See for example Mohammed Hafez, "Armed Islamist movements and political violence in Algeria", *Middle East Journal*, vol. 54, no. 4, Fall 2000; id., "From marginalization to massacres: A political process explanation of GIA violence in Algeria", in: Quintan Wiktorowicz (ed.), *Islamic activism: A social movement theory approach*, Bloomington & Indianapolis, 2004; Quintan Wiktorowicz, "Centrifugal tendencies in the Algerian civil war", *Arab Studies Quarterly*, vol. 23, no. 3, Summer 2001.

⁶ Bernard Lewis, "Some observations on the significance of heresy in the history of Islam", *Studia Islamica*, no. 1, 1953, 54, 59–60.

⁷ For more on these debates, see Joas Wagemakers, "Defining the enemy: Abū Muḥammad al-Maqdisi's radical reading of Sūrat al-Mumtaḥana", *Die Welt des Islams*, vol. 48, nos. 3–4, 2008, 353–8; id., "The transformation of a radical concept: *Al-wala' wa-l-bara'* in the ideology of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi", in: Meijer (ed.), *Global*, 95–101.

⁸ It is important to realise that not all sins in Islam amount to the level of unbelief. Some sins are less serious and do not turn a person into an unbeliever. For an overview of when a sin becomes an act of *kufr* from a Jihādi-Salafī point of view, which is largely—but not entirely—shared by many other Muslims, see Wagemakers, "Transformation", 97–9.

whether the term *jahl* should be translated as “ignorance”,⁹ this is the meaning the term seems to have at least some times in the Qur’ān¹⁰ and, in any case, is the interpretation of *jahl* used by the subjects of this study.

This chapter concentrates on the question of whether *jahl* is an excuse for *kufr* and therefore an obstacle for others to declare *takfir*. More specifically, this question is dealt with in the context of a debate between three important scholars of Salafism, a strict and purist trend within Islam that tries to emulate the pious predecessors (*al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ*, hence the name Salafism) as closely and in as many spheres of life as possible.¹¹ The three scholars dealt with in this chapter all belong to the Jihādī branch of this trend, adhering to the strict tenets of the Salafi ideology as a whole but emphasising the supposed unbelief of the rulers of today’s Muslim countries and the necessity to fight them through jihad. The concept of *takfir*, being necessary to justify their jihad against Muslim rulers, is therefore especially important to them.¹²

In what follows, this chapter first gives an overview of the debate and the different points of view that its three participants derive from the sources of Islam, particularly the Qur’ān, and how they respond to one another. I subsequently analyse the political relevance these scholars derive from their points of view. By closely analysing this

⁹ *Jahl* as ignorance seems to be the opposite of *‘ilm* (knowledge). This has been challenged, however, by authors stating that the term *jahl* in fact primarily denoted recklessness and wildness in pre-Islamic Arabia and only secondarily ignorance. *Jahl*, in their view, should therefore be juxtaposed with *ḥilm* (mildness, forbearance). The *jāhiliyya*, the pre-Islamic era usually described as the “age of ignorance” should be seen as a time in which the rude and passionate tempers of the tribes dominated. See Ignaz Goldziher, *Muhammedanische Studien*, vol. I, Halle, 1889, 221–8; Izutsu, *Ethico*, 28–36; id., *God and man in the Koran: Semantics of the Koranic Weltanschauung*, Tokyo, 1964, 203–19.

¹⁰ William E. Shepard, “Ignorance”, in: Jane Dammen McAuliffe (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān* (hereafter EQ), vol. II, Leiden & Boston, 2002, 487–8.

¹¹ For more on Salafism, see Meijer (ed.), *Global*; Bernard Rougier (ed.), *Qu’est-ce que le Salafisme?*, Paris, 2008. For global overviews of Salafism, see especially Roel Meijer, “Introduction”, in: Meijer (ed.), *Global*; Bernard Haykel, “On the Nature of Salafi Thought and Action”, in: Meijer (ed.), *Global*; Bernard Rougier, “Introduction”, in: Rougier (ed.), *Salafisme*.

¹² For a more detailed explanation of different types of Salafis, see Quintan Wiktorowicz, “The anatomy of the Salafi movement”, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, vol. 29, no. 3, 2005. For a critical treatment of Wiktorowicz’s division of Salafis, see Joas Wagemakers, “A purist Jihadi-Salafi: The ideology of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi”, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 36, no. 2, August 2009.

Jihādī-Salafī debate, we not only learn more about *takfir* and one particular obstacle to its application but also get a chance to look at a discussion between generally like-minded yet slightly differing scholars of a branch of Islam usually closed to the general public.¹³ Furthermore, this debate also shows how Jihādī-Salafī scholars, though they all rely on the Qurʾān and the Sunna, come up with diverging answers to the questions dealt with, thereby showing the dynamics of the scriptural sources of Islam.

Debating ignorance

The debate on *jahl* that forms the focal point of this chapter took place between the Egyptian ʿAbd al-Qādir b. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz (b. 1950), the Palestinian-Jordanian Abū Muḥammad al-Maqdisī (b. 1959) and the Syrian-British Abū Baṣīr al-Ṭarṭūsī (b. 1959) in the late 1990s and early 2000s; it was always conducted in a brotherly and friendly fashion. It started with Ibn ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz’s *Al-Jāmiʿ fī Ṭalab al-ʿIlm al-Sharīf*, a book of over a thousand pages that was meant as a guide to Muslims for self-study, pointing out what knowledge they should acquire.¹⁴ Al-Maqdisī, who was in prison in Jordan at the time, describes how he obtained a copy of the book’s second volume (with several pages missing) through fellow-prisoners and decided to comment on it in a book of his own.¹⁵ This book and another of al-Maqdisī’s writings¹⁶

¹³ Other debates between Jihādī-Salafīs include those between the Egyptian al-Jamāʿa al-Islāmiyya and al-Qāʿida and between Abū Muḥammad al-Maqdisī and his former student Abū Muṣab al-Zarqawī. For more on the former, see Fawaz Gerges, *The far enemy: Why jihad went global*, Cambridge etc., 2005, 200–18. For more on the latter, see Anouar Boukhars, “The challenge of terrorism and religious extremism in Jordan”, *Strategic insights* (www.ccc.nps.navy.mil/si/2006/Apr/boukharsApr06.asp), 2006, vol. 5, no. 4; Steven Brooke, “The preacher and the jihadi”, in: Hillel Fradkin, Husain Haqqani & Eric Brown (eds.), *Current trends in Islamic ideology*, Vol. III, Washington D.C., 2006; Nibras Kazimi, “A virulent ideology in mutation: Zarqawi upstages Maqdisi”, in: Hillel Fradkin, Husain Haqqani & Eric Brown (eds.), *Current trends in Islamist ideology*, Vol. II, Washington D.C., 2005; Joas Wagemakers, “Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi: A counter-terrorism asset?”, *CTC Sentinel* (www.ctc.usma.edu/sentinel/CTCSentinel-Vol1Iss6.pdf), vol. 1, no. 6, May 2008.

¹⁴ ʿAbd al-Qādir b. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz, *Al-jāmiʿ fī ṭalab al-ʿilm al-sharīf*, www.tawhed.ws/a?a=85ud42ss (accessed 20 October, 2009), n.d.

¹⁵ Abū Muḥammad al-Maqdisī, *Al-nukat al-lawāmiʿ fī malḥūzāt al-jāmiʿ*, www.tawhed.ws/t (accessed 21 January, 2008), 1998, 1–2.

¹⁶ Id., *Kashf shubḥāt al-mujādilin ʿan ʿasākīr al-shirk wa-anṣār al-qawānīn*, www.tawhed.ws/t (accessed 5 May, 2007), 1999.

were then commented upon by Abū Baṣīr, who focussed only on one of the topics dealt with by al-Maḳḍisī, namely the use of the concept of ignorance to excuse certain sins (*al-ʿudhr bi-l-jahl*).¹⁷ Al-Maḳḍisī subsequently replied to Abū Baṣīr's comments on his book by sending him a private letter. When, however, Abū Baṣīr decided to respond to al-Maḳḍisī's letter again and put this response¹⁸ on his own website, al-Maḳḍisī decided to publish his letter as well so as to give a more complete overview of the entire debate.¹⁹ The different writings are dealt with separately below.

Ibn ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz Starts the Debate

The Egyptian radical ideologue ʿAbd al-Qādir b. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz, better known as Sayyid Imām or Dr. Faḍl, was the first leader of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad Organisation, which was responsible for the assassination of Egyptian President Anwar al-Sādāt in 1981. Although he managed to escape the country at the time, he was later arrested in Yemen after the terrorist attacks in the United States on 11 September 2001 and extradited to Egypt, where he is still in prison today. Ibn ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz has attracted some attention lately for somewhat revising his earlier, more radical views in favour of slightly more moderate ideas that do not advocate violence as much.²⁰

Ibn ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz's book relevant to our discussion was written much earlier than his more recent "revisions" and explains in great detail what his views are on, among other things, the question of *al-ʿudhr bi-l-jahl*. Interestingly (and contrary to what Jihādī-Salafis' reputation as "takfiris" suggests), Ibn ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz's book seems partly meant to limit the use of *takfir*. Although he mostly deals with this topic in

¹⁷ Abū Baṣīr al-Tartūsī, *Kabwat fāris: Munāqashat qawl Abi Muḥammad al-Maḳḍisī fī maʿalat al-ʿudhr bi-l-jahl wa-l-radd ʿalayhi*, www.abubaseer.bizland.com/articles.htm (accessed 26 October, 2009), 2000.

¹⁸ Id., *Taṣwībātunā li-risālat ḥādhihi ʿaqīdatinā li-akhinā Abi Muḥammad al-Maḳḍisī*, www.abubaseer.bizland.com/refutation.htm (accessed 20 October, 2009), 2000.

¹⁹ Abū Muḥammad al-Maḳḍisī, *Risāla li-l-shaykh Abi Baṣīr*, www.tawhed.ws/t (accessed 20 October, 2009), n.d., 1.

²⁰ For more on this phenomenon, see Amel Lamnaouer & Romain Caillet, "De l'usage du jihad: La fin d'une ère en Égypte? Les révisions idéologiques de Sayyid Imām", in: Hadjar Aouardji & Hélène Legeay (eds.), *L'Égypte dans l'année 2007*, Cairo, 2008; Lawrence Wright, "The rebellion within: An al Qaeda master questions terrorism", *The New Yorker*, www.newyorker.com/reporting/2008/06/02/080602fa_fact_wright (accessed 20 October, 2009), 2 June 2008.

sections of the book that al-Maqdisi had not read and were therefore not part of the debate that followed, it is nevertheless important to take a closer look at them since Ibn 'Abd al-'Aziz gives a much more elaborate overview of his ideas than in the sections that al-Maqdisi did read.

The author states that some (unnamed) scholars write about the subject of *takfir* "without taking the objections to *takfir* (*mawānī' al-takfir*) into consideration".²¹ Apparently in an effort to counter this lack of attention to the limits to *takfir*, he goes on to explain meticulously to what extent and why such an objection—in this case *jahl*—can be an excuse for *kufr*. He defines *jahl* in the context of his subject as "the lack of knowledge (*'adam al-'ilm*) of Islamic legal rulings (*al-aḥkām al-shar'iyya*) or its causes (*asbābihā*)"²² and describes *'udhr* as "the argument (*al-ḥujja*) that [the person accused of *kufr*] excuses himself with".²³ The author sees *jahl* as one of a number of "acquired obstacles" (*'awāriḍ muktasaba*), meaning that these are obstacles to *takfir* that human beings have acquired themselves, as opposed to "heavenly obstacles" (*'awāriḍ samāwiyya*), such as mental defects, for which he believes God is responsible.²⁴

Having defined both *jahl* and *'udhr*, Ibn 'Abd al-'Aziz goes on to state that if an unbeliever commits an act of *kufr* but is ignorant (*jāhil*) of this, he will be called a *kāfir* since that is what he already was. God will not, however, punish him for this particular act of *kufr*, either in this world or in the hereafter, since his ignorance in this case excuses his actions.²⁵ The conclusion that an ignorant *kāfir* should still be referred to as a *kāfir* may seem fairly obvious but the author nevertheless feels the need to show scriptural evidence. He finds the clearest justification for his view in Qur'ān 9: 6, which states: "And if any of the idolaters (*al-mushrikīn*) seeks of thee protection, grant him protection till he hears the words of God (*kalām Allāh*) [...] because they are a

²¹ Ibn 'Abd al-'Aziz, *Al-jāmi'*, vol. I, 417.

²² The word "causes" here refers to the legal causes underlying legal rulings.

²³ Ibn 'Abd al-'Aziz, *Al-jāmi'*, vol. I, 418–9.

²⁴ Ibid., 420. In a different book on *takfir*, al-Maqdisi makes the same distinction and explains the section of acquired obstacles in great detail. See Abū Muḥammad al-Maqdisi, *Al-risāla al-thalāthiniyya fī l-taḥdhīr min al-ghulūw fī l-takfir*, www.tawhed.ws/t (accessed 26 October, 2009), 1998/1999, 38–54.

²⁵ Ibid., 423.

people who do not know.”²⁶ From this passage, Ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz concludes that the Qur’ān refers to people who apparently have not heard “the words of God” and are therefore ignorant (“they are a people who do not know”) as idolaters. Since idolaters are necessarily not Muslims and therefore unbelievers, he contends that this passage justifies calling even an ignorant unbeliever a *kāfir*.²⁷

In spite of being *kuffār*, Ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz nevertheless states that God will not punish unbelievers for an act of *kufṛ* if they were ignorant of the legal ruling concerning it. He bases this on several passages from the Qur’ān, most prominently 17: 15 (“We never chastise until We send forth a Messenger (*rasūlan*)”), 28: 47 (“[...] ‘Our Lord, why didst Thou not send a Messenger to us that we might follow Thy signs and so be among the believers?’”) and 20: 134:

Had We destroyed them with a chastisement aforetime, they would have said, “Our Lord, why didst Thou not send us a Messenger, so that we might have followed Thy signs before that we were humiliated and degraded?”

From these and other verses,²⁸ Ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz concludes that God only punishes a person after He has sent a messenger who calls people (*da‘wa*) to the truth. If a person is honestly ignorant of the truth because no messenger has been sent to him, his *jahl* acts as an excuse for his *kufṛ* and God will not punish him for it.²⁹ The same applies to a Muslim who commits an act of *kufṛ* out of ignorance. His *jahl* excuses his sin and spares him from punishment, both on earth and in the hereafter, and, significantly, also from bearing the label of *kāfir* since the ruling (*ḥukm*) of *takfīr* is not appropriate for a Muslim who truly did not know any better.³⁰

It is important to point out that Ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz makes a clear distinction here between the judgement of *takfīr* and the divine punishment of a *kāfir*. This distinction is, however, more or less lost among most other Jihādī-Salafī scholars. While they do write about punishment as such, they seem to conflate punishment for a *kāfir* with the *ḥukm* of *takfīr*, implicitly assuming that if the former is justified, the

²⁶ This quotation and any subsequent ones are taken from A. J. Arberry, *The Koran interpreted*, New York, 1955.

²⁷ Ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz, *Al-jāmi‘*, 423–4.

²⁸ The other verses he mentions are Q. 6: 131; 26: 208; 28: 59.

²⁹ Ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz, *Al-jāmi‘*, vol. I, 424.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 423–6.

latter is too. This tendency is possibly explained by the fact that *takfīr* of a Muslim is more practically relevant to people than divine punishment of a sinner, over which other human beings have no control.³¹

Quite apart from this distinction, the argument that neither a Muslim nor a non-Muslim will be punished by God until a messenger has been sent to him is very important to Ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz and constitutes the core of his ideas on this issue. Once again quoting the Qur’ānic verses mentioned above, he states that God uses messengers for setting up an argument or proof (*iqāmat al-ḥujja*) that shows a person to be wrong in his actions. If a person was never reached by such a messenger or if he did come into contact with the message of Islam but failed to understand it, he will be tested on the Day of Resurrection on whether or not he should be punished after all. Quoting the work of Taqī al-Dīn Aḥmad b. Taymiyya (1263–1328), Ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz states that in the end only those who follow Satan will go to hell.³²

The point in all of this is that the author believes that somehow human beings have to be informed about the sinfulness of their actions in order to be justifiably held responsible for them. Ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz contends on the basis of the Qur’ān that informing people about this is done by sending messengers to show people the right way. If no messenger was sent, people are ignorant, which excuses their *kufīr* and protects them from punishment. It is precisely this point that the author briefly repeats in the second volume of his book³³ and which is subsequently criticised by al-Maqdisī, to whom we must now turn.

Al-Maqdisī’s critique

The Palestinian-Jordanian ideologue Abū Muḥammad al-Maqdisī is not affiliated with any particular organisation but is generally considered to be one of the most important Jihādī-Salafī scholars alive. Born in the West Bank when it was still occupied by Jordan, he moved to Kuwait, Saudi-Arabia, Pakistan and Afghanistan, only to end up in

³¹ Not all Jihādī-Salafī scholars fail to make this distinction, however. Exceptions are for example ‘Alī b. Khudāyr al-Khudāyr, *Hal yuḥkamu bi-l-nār ‘alā man māta kāfīran wa-huwa mutamakkin min al-‘ilm?*, www.tawhed.ws/c?i=245 (accessed 8 October, 2009), n.d.; Aḥmad b. Ḥamūd al-Khālidi, *Al-tibyān li-mā waqa’a fī “l-dawābiṭ” mansūban li-ahl al-Sunna bi-lā burhān*, www.tawhed.ws/c?i=245 (accessed 8 October, 2009), 1997, 24, 26. Both scholars, however, focus mostly on *takfīr*.

³² Ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz, *Al-jāmi’*, 427–9.

³³ Ibid., vol. II, 563.

Jordan again in the early 1990s. He spent several years in prison there for his alleged support for terrorist attacks together with Abū Muṣʿab al-Zarqāwī (1966–2006), who later became the leader of Al-Qāʿida in Iraq. Al-Maqdisī was released in 2008 and has been a free man since.³⁴

In the book in which he criticises Ibn ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz, al-Maqdisī dedicates a few pages to *al-ʿudhr bi-l-jahl*. In these pages, he correctly states that the former believes *jahl* to be an excuse for *kufr*, that such a *jāhil* is only punished after a messenger has been sent to him to show him the right direction and that he bases this on words to that effect in Q. 17: 15.³⁵ Al-Maqdisī, however, disagrees with this analysis. He states that there are people who have not received a messenger but are nevertheless punished in the hereafter. To prove this point, he quotes a tradition of Muḥammad (*ḥadīth*) in which the Prophet tells a man that both of their fathers are in hell. If these pre-Islamic, polytheistic fathers went to hell even though they could not possibly have known about the message of the Prophet Muḥammad, the question of whether or not people received a messenger cannot be the only criteria in deciding whether or not *jahl* can be used as an excuse for *kufr*. It is with regard to people such as these fathers, al-Maqdisī states, that God revealed two passages in the Qurʾān: (32: 3) “[...] that thou mayest warn a people to whom no warner came before thee, that haply so they may be guided” and (36: 6) “that thou mayest warn a people whose fathers were never warned, so they are heedless”. Al-Maqdisī writes that the fathers referred to in the *ḥadīth*, who—according to Muḥammad—are in hell, are from the same people as those referred to in these verses (“a people to whom no warner came before thee”, “whose fathers were never warned”). If they are indeed in hell, as the *ḥadīth* says, and no messenger was ever sent to them, as the Qurʾān states, then this must mean that people can actually be punished without having been reached by a messenger.³⁶

Although al-Maqdisī’s reading of the Qurʾān explains that he believes that people who have not received a messenger may also go to hell, it does not tell us why these people are punished. This, al-Maqdisī

³⁴ Wagemakers, “Purist”, 285–6, 297.

³⁵ Al-Maqdisī, *Al-nukat*, 10. Although Ibn ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz mentions more verses than just this one, as mentioned above, this is the only one mentioned in the part of Ibn ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz’s book that al-Maqdisī obtained and read.

³⁶ Ibid., 10–11.

explains, has to do with three different but related concepts, namely *fiṭra* (nature, disposition), *mīthāq* (covenant) and *ḥanīf* (someone who seeks or professes the true religion). The exact meaning of the former term is not agreed upon by Muslim scholars³⁷ but, based on a *ḥadīth* in which Muḥammad says that every child is born with *fiṭra* and its parents turn it into a Jew, Christian or a follower of another religion,³⁸ al-Maqdisī seems to interpret it as a natural human inclination towards God and the realisation of His unity (*tawḥīd*). Similarly, the term *mīthāq* can refer to several covenants that, according to Islamic tradition, God made with various prophets including Nūḥ (Noah), Muḥammad himself and, most importantly, Ādam (Adam). Al-Maqdisī interprets the term *mīthāq* in the context of *al-‘udhr bi-l-jahl* as referring to a covenant between God and Ādam (and the rest of mankind as a result) in which God ordered human beings to follow Him and not Satan.³⁹ Finally, the exact beliefs of *ḥunafā’* (pl. of *ḥanīf*) are also not agreed upon. However, certain pre-Islamic persons—primarily Ibrāhīm (Abraham)—who discarded the polytheistic traditions of their forefathers and sought to worship only one god are generally regarded as *ḥunafā’* by Muslims as well as by academic scholars. It therefore seems clear that a tendency towards monotheism was a *ḥanīf*’s main characteristic and al-Maqdisī also broadly treats *ḥunafā’* as monotheists.⁴⁰

Al-Maqdisī ties all three concepts together to show why people cannot use *jahl* as an excuse for committing an act of *kufr*.⁴¹ He contends

³⁷ Camilla Adang, “Islam as the inborn religion of mankind: The concept of *fiṭra* in the works of Ibn Ḥazm”, *Al-Qanṭara*, vol. 21, no. 2, 2000, 392–4; Geneviève Gobillot, “L’épître du discours sur la *fiṭra* (*risāla fi-l-kalām ‘alā-l-fiṭra*) de Taqī-l-Dīn Aḥmad Ibn Taymiya (661/1262–728/1328)”, *Annales Islamologiques*, vol. 20, 1984, 31, 33–5; Toshihiko Izutsu, *The concept of belief in Islamic theology: A semantic analysis of imān and Islām*, Yokohama, 1965, 226–7; A. J. Wensinck, *The Muslim creed: Its genesis and historical development*, London, 1965 [1932], 214–5.

³⁸ *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, Book XLVI (“Kitāb al-qadr”), chapter 6 (“Bāb ma’nā kull mawlūd [...]”), no. 2658.

³⁹ For more on this, see especially Q. 20: 115 and 36: 60. See also C. E. Bosworth, “Mīthāq”, in: C. E. Bosworth et al. (eds.), *Encyclopaedia of Islam: New edition* (hereafter *EP*), vol. VII, Leiden & New York, 1993; Gerhard Böwering, “Covenant”, in: Jane Dammen McAuliffe (ed.), *EQ*, vol. I, Leiden etc., 2001.

⁴⁰ For more on this, see Uri Rubin, “Ḥanīf”, in: McAuliffe (ed.), *EQ*, vol. II; W. Montgomery Watt, “Ḥanīf”, in: B. Lewis et al. (eds.), *EP*, vol. III, Leiden & London, 1971.

⁴¹ Al-Maqdisī also believes that the message of God’s unity was proclaimed by all previous holy books and revelations (such as those to Moses and Jesus) so that human beings cannot claim ignorance of this information if they did not know about

that Ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz’s argument does not take into account that God has given people an inner sense of the basis or root of monotheism (*aṣl al-tawḥīd*). If people violate this by committing acts of polytheism that clearly show a person’s unbelief in Islam—for example prostrating before other gods or praying to idols—they cannot possibly claim *jahl* as an excuse because, being *ḥunafā’* who were created with *fiṭra*,⁴² they are seekers of and instinctive believers in God’s *tawḥīd*. Doing anything different can only be a conscious refusal to accept their own search for the true religion and their natural inclination towards monotheism; this conclusion is drawn by many other Jihādī-Salafī scholars as well.⁴³

For the same reason, al-Maqdisī believes that people guilty of violating the *aṣl al-tawḥīd* will suffer punishment for their acts of *kufr*, even if they have not been reached by any messengers. Since, as *ḥunafā’*, people want to seek the one true God and, having been created with *fiṭra*, the belief in God is ingrained in their very being, they do not need messengers to tell them about the root of monotheism because they already know it.⁴⁴ On top of this, al-Maqdisī also states that mankind made a *mīthāq* with God through Ādam to serve Him and is therefore aware of God’s existence, further underlining his belief that messengers are not needed to tell people about the *aṣl al-tawḥīd*.⁴⁵

Muḥammad’s message. See al-Maqdisī, *Al-nukat*, 10. See also id., *Kashf*, 34; id., *Husn*, 26–7; id., *Majmū’ fatāwā l-Shaykh Abū* (sic) *Muḥammad al-Maqdisī*, n.p., 2007, 80.

⁴² Al-Maqdisī proves this by quoting several *ḥadīths* that state that human beings are *ḥunafā’* and were created with *fiṭra*. See al-Maqdisī, *Kashf*, 34.

⁴³ See Ḥāmid b. ‘Abdallāh al-‘Alī, *Hal yu‘malu bi-mawānī’ al-takfīr fī l-ḥukm ‘alā ‘ibād al-qubūr?*, www.tawhed.ws/c?i=245 (accessed 8 October, 2009), 2006, 2; al-Khālidi, *Al-tibyān*, 11–20, 23–26; ‘Alī b. Khudayr al-Khudayr, *Hal yu’dharu bi-l-jahl fī umūr al-‘aqida am lā?*, www.tawhed.ws/c?i=245 (accessed on 8 October, 2009), n.d., 1; id., *Hawla madhhab a’immat al-da’wa al-Najdiyya fī mas’alat al-‘udhr bi-l-jahl*, www.tawhed.ws/c?i=245 (accessed on 8 October, 2009), n.d., 1; id., *Al-mutammina li-kalām a’immat al-da’wa fī mas’alat al-jahl fī l-shirk al-akbar*, www.tawhed.ws/c?i=245 (accessed on 8 October, 2009), n.d., 5–40; id., *Qawā’id wa-uṣūl fī l-muqallidīn wa-l-juhāl wa-qiyām al-ḥujja fī l-shirk al-akbar wa-l-kufr al-akbar wa-l-bida’*, www.tawhed.ws/c?i=245 (accessed on 8 October, 2009), n.d., 2; Muḥammad Salīm Walad Muḥammad al-Amin al-Majlisi, *Al-radd al-sahl ‘alā ahl al-‘udhr bi-l-jahl*, www.tawhed.ws/c?i=245 (accessed 8 October, 2009), 2005, 1–3, 7; Abū Maryam ‘Abd al-Rahmān b. Ṭallā’ al-Mukhallaf, *‘Adam al-‘udhr bi-l-jahl fī aṣl al-dīn*, www.tawhed.ws/c?i=245 (accessed 8 October, 2009), n.d., 13–14, 19–20, 25.

⁴⁴ Al-Maqdisī, *Al-nukat*, 10–11; see also Abū Muḥammad al-Maqdisī, *Husn al-rifāqa fī ajwibat su’ālāt al-sawāqa*, www.tawhed.ws/t (accessed 23 October, 2009), 1996, 26–8; id., *Kashf*, 34, 36.

⁴⁵ Id., *Husn*, 26.

Al-Maqdisi's rebuttal of Ibn 'Abd al-'Aziz's arguments seems to suggest that people will never be excused by *jahl* for any act of *kufr*, with or without having been reached by a messenger. This gives the impression that al-Maqdisi simply ignores the Qur'anic verses Ibn 'Abd al-'Aziz quotes to prove his point. This, however, is not the case. Al-Maqdisi does deal with this evidence but reinterprets it. Q. 17: 15 ("We never chastise, until We send forth a Messenger"), for example, on the basis of which Ibn 'Abd al-'Aziz claims that people will not be punished without having been reached by a messenger, does not refer to the root of monotheism, according to al-Maqdisi. Instead, this verse only refers to the details of monotheism (*tafāṣīl al-tawḥīd*) or its branches (*furū'*), al-Maqdisi writes. Whereas people naturally know about the *aṣl al-tawḥīd* because of their inborn inclination towards the belief in God, al-Maqdisi states that they cannot be expected to have knowledge of all the detailed implications that monotheism has (such as prayer), as expressed in the *furū' al-tawḥīd*. People therefore do need messengers to reach them, al-Maqdisi writes, but only to explain the *furū' al-tawḥīd*. If people violate these without having been reached by a messenger, they can indeed claim *jahl* as an excuse and will not be punished either on earth or in the hereafter.⁴⁶ To illustrate and prove his point, al-Maqdisi cites a *ḥadīth* about Zayd b. 'Amr b. Nufayl, "who did not pray our prayer and did not fast our fast and did not have the details of belief that are present and decided upon in the Qur'ān today". In spite of his negligence in fulfilling these duties, all of which may be deduced from *tawḥīd*, Zayd was nevertheless excused by the Prophet because he did profess the belief in God and had simply never been told about the details related to this belief.⁴⁷

Al-Maqdisi—in contrast to Ibn 'Abd al-'Aziz—thus believes on the basis of both the Qur'ān and the Sunna that people to whom no messenger was sent can nevertheless go to hell. He states that this is the case if people violate their natural and inborn inclination towards monotheism based on *fiṭra*, the *mīthāq* between God and Ādam and the fact that they are born as *ḥunafā'*. Consequently, he believes that such people cannot use *jahl* as an excuse for their *kufr*. Finally, al-Maqdisi agrees with Ibn 'Abd al-'Aziz about the need for messengers to guide people in their beliefs but states that they are only necessary to show

⁴⁶ Id., *Al-nukat*, 11; id., *Husn*, 27.

⁴⁷ Id., *Husn*, 28.

the *furūʿ al-tawḥīd* since only these more detailed aspects of monotheism are not automatically known to people. Al-Maqdisī therefore concludes that Ibn ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz’s assertion that people only go to hell after having been reached by a messenger is mostly true, but not entirely.⁴⁸

Ibn ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz “responds”

In the debate on the issue of *al-ʿudhr bi-l-jahl*, Ibn ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz has not written anything to refute al-Maqdisī’s criticism of his book. He was aware of the arguments that al-Maqdisī used, however, because—unbeknownst to the latter—he had already addressed the question of *mīthāq* and *fiṭra* in the first volume of his book. He writes that some believe that the covenant between God and Ādam, mentioned in Q. 7: 172–4, precludes people from using *jahl* as an excuse for violating *tawḥīd* because through Ādam’s *mīthāq* with God mankind has already acknowledged the divinity or lordship of God (*rubūbiyyat Allāh*), which refers to what al-Maqdisī calls *aṣl al-tawḥīd*.⁴⁹ He also states that some believe *fiṭra* to mean not just that everyone is naturally inclined to monotheism but even that all people are born as Muslims. This is, according to those scholars, another reason why *jahl* cannot be used as an excuse for the violation of God’s *tawḥīd* since everyone is aware of that by nature.⁵⁰

Ibn ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz partly tries to refute these views, to which al-Maqdisī also subscribes, by reiterating his earlier arguments⁵¹ but he also introduces new ideas. He states, for example, that the existence of a *mīthāq* between God and Ādam is indeed an argument against human beings that they do know about *tawḥīd*, but it is an incomplete argument (*ḥujja nāqiṣa*) because people have forgotten about this covenant and need to be reminded of it by messengers.⁵² This way, Ibn ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz

⁴⁸ Id., *Al-nukat*, 12.

⁴⁹ Salafis divide *tawḥīd* into different types, one of which is *tawḥīd al-rubūbiyya*, which refers to the notion that God is the only divine entity and the Creator of the world. Ibn ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz and al-Maqdisī both use different terms here to refer to this form of *tawḥīd*. For an overview of the place of *tawḥīd* in Islam, see Tamara Sonn, “Tawḥīd”, in: John L. Esposito (ed.), *The Oxford encyclopedia of the Islamic world*, vol. V, Oxford etc., 2009.

⁵⁰ Ibn ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz, *Al-jāmiʿ*, 436–7.

⁵¹ Ibid., 437–8.

⁵² Ibid., 438.

incorporates the concept of *mīthāq* into his own argument that human beings will not be punished for acts of *kufr* unless they were reached by a messenger. This reasoning is obviously not applicable to *fiṭra* which, supposedly being part of human nature, cannot simply be forgotten. Ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz does not address this, however. He does write that *fiṭra* is very general and that people need messengers to give them its detailed consequences, implicitly making the same distinction between *aṣl al-tawhīd* and *furū‘ al-tawhīd* as al-Maqdisī.⁵³

Because Ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz does not adequately address the argument that *fiṭra* precludes people’s right to excuse their acts of *kufr* by claiming ignorance and to some extent even agrees with al-Maqdisī, his “response” to the latter is not very strong here. To be fair to Ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz, however, it has to be mentioned again that he simply reacted to general “mistakes” about this issue and was obviously not aware of al-Maqdisī’s criticism and therefore could not respond to it. A person who was able to do so and has therefore written a much more detailed and sustained rebuttal of al-Maqdisī’s criticism of Ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz is Abū Baṣīr al-Ṭartūsī.

Abū Baṣīr Defends Ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz’s Ideas

Very little is known about Abū Baṣīr al-Ṭartūsī, whose real name is ‘Abd al-Mun‘im Muṣṭafā Ḥalīma. Unlike other Jihādī-Salafīs, who are sometimes quite media-savvy, he generally shies away from media attention and seems to concentrate on his writings, which he puts on his website. The fact that he speaks very little English, despite living in Britain, may also be a factor in his keeping a low profile. He did attract some attention, however, for condemning the London bombings of 7 July 2005 and, more recently, for declaring that the well-known preacher and scholar Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī is an infidel.⁵⁴

Abū Baṣīr begins his refutation of al-Maqdisī’s criticism of Ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz by giving an overview of the ideas he is going to rebut. Al-Maqdisī, he claims, does not recognise any objections—*jahl* or others—to *takfīr* and states that everyone committing an act of *kufr* is a *kāfir* who will be punished in the hereafter, irrespective of whether or not such persons have been reached by a messenger. He justifies this,

⁵³ Ibid., 438–9.

⁵⁴ Abū Baṣīr’s website is www.abubaseer.bizland.com, on which his *takfīr* of al-Qaraḍāwī can be found.

Abū Baṣīr writes, by pointing to the concepts of *fiṭra* and *mīthāq*.⁵⁵ The author states that al-Maḳdisī's views are actually contrary to Islamic law (*sharī'a*) and the opinions of the majority of the 'ulamā' and are quite extreme. Abū Baṣīr even states that these ideas may help "modern-day extremists" (*ghulāt hādihā l-ʿaṣr*), although he acknowledges that al-Maḳdisī probably did not intend his writings to do so and that the latter has, in fact, written against the careless use of *takfīr*.⁵⁶

While the above accusations against al-Maḳdisī by Abū Baṣīr are, to a certain extent, a mischaracterisation of the former's ideas—al-Maḳdisī does recognise objections to *takfīr*, for example⁵⁷—the rest of the treatise continues to refute al-Maḳdisī's actual views. Abū Baṣīr begins by pointing out that the Qur'ān and the Sunna give "a very clear indication" (*dalāla qat'iyya ṣariḥa*) that punishment in hell only occurs after a messenger has been sent. As we have seen above, al-Maḳdisī acknowledges that this happens most of the time but does believe there are exceptions. Abū Baṣīr denies this, however, and states that all people must be reached by a messenger before they can be punished, both on earth as well as in the hereafter. He quotes several verses from the Qur'ān that seem to prove that a messenger needs to be sent before any punishment can take place, for example 39: 71:

Then the unbelievers shall be driven in companies into Gehenna [hell] till, when they have come thither, then its gates will be opened and its keepers will say to them, "Did not Messengers come to you from among yourselves, reciting to you the signs of your Lord and warning you against the encounter of this day?" They shall say, "Yes indeed (*balā*); but the word of the chastisement (*kalimat al-ʿadhāb*) has been realised against the unbelievers."

Abū Baṣīr goes on to quote several scholars who confirm that verses such as this one are not about the majority of people but about all people, without any exceptions.⁵⁸ He also points out that similar conclusions should be drawn from several *aḥādīth*.⁵⁹ This, Abū Baṣīr states, not only shows that having been reached by a messenger is indeed a

⁵⁵ Al-Tartūsī, *Kabwat*, 1–2.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 1.

⁵⁷ The fact that al-Maḳdisī does recognise objections and obstacles to *takfīr* is not only clear from his writings dealt with in this chapter but also from an extensive study he wrote shortly before Abū Baṣīr released his refutation. See al-Maḳdisī, *Al-risāla al-thalāthiniyya*, especially 33–80.

⁵⁸ Al-Tartūsī, *Kabwat*, 4–11.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 11–6.

condition for punishment but also that *jahl* can be used as an excuse for those who have not come into contact with one.⁶⁰ According to Abū Baṣīr, this is part of a larger point, namely that God does not hold people responsible for things that are beyond their control and does not punish them any more than they deserve.⁶¹

Abū Baṣīr then takes on al-Maqdisī's argument that people cannot be excused by claiming *jahl* because of their *mīthāq* with God and their *fiṭra*. He acknowledges that these concepts exist but states that "the wisdom of God (*ḥikmat Allāh*) has decreed that nobody is punished on the basis of these arguments". The only thing that counts when it comes to punishment, Abū Baṣīr maintains, is people's "refusal and negation (*radd wa-juḥūd*) of the warning of the messengers (*nidhārat al-rusul*)".⁶² Since Abū Baṣīr acknowledges—on the basis of texts already mentioned—that some pre-Islamic people are indeed in hell without having been in contact with the message of Islam but refuses to ascribe this to their violation of the *mīthāq* or their *fiṭra*, he has to come up with an alternative explanation for their punishment. He does so by pointing out that these people may not have been warned by Muḥammad himself but "the warning of the messengers that were sent before Muḥammad [...], such as Ibrāhīm and other prophets, [did] reach them." He stresses that people can only be punished if they are reached by a messenger, who need not necessarily be the messenger (i.e. Muḥammad himself) and emphasises that no scholar has ever set the latter as a condition for punishment.⁶³ For Abū Baṣīr, this reasoning is a way to avoid the concepts of *mīthāq*, *fiṭra* and *ḥanīf* as arguments against sinners while remaining true to the scriptural evidence he presents.

Finally, Abū Baṣīr takes issue with al-Maqdisī's distinction between the *aṣl al-tawḥīd* and *furū' al-tawḥīd* in this respect, with only the latter being excusable by *jahl*. The author states that the scriptural sources do not make a distinction between different elements of *tawḥīd* with regard to *al-'udhr bi-l-jahl* and al-Maqdisī should therefore not do this either. In fact, Abū Baṣīr writes, the evidence from the Qur'an and the Sunna that excuses *jahl* refers to all forms of ignorance, not just some.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 11; id., *Al-'udhr bi-l-jahl wa-qiyām al-ḥujja*, www.tawhed.ws/c?i=245 (accessed 8 October, 2009), 2001 [1991], 57–62.

⁶¹ Id., *Kabwat*, 10–11; id., *Al-'udhr*, 19–42, 63–72.

⁶² Id., *Kabwat*, 21; see also id., *Al-'udhr*, 47–57.

⁶³ Id., *Kabwat*, 17–8.

More important, however, is the fact that the Sunna actually provides an example of a supposed violation of the *aṣl al-tawḥīd* that is nevertheless excused by Muḥammad.⁶⁴ Abū Baṣīr refers to a story of ‘Adī b. Ḥātim who, according to a *ḥadīth*, went to Muḥammad wearing a gold cross hanging from his neck. The Prophet told him to “throw away this idol (*iṭraḥ ḥādhā l-wathan*)” and referred to Q. 9: 31 (“They have taken their rabbis and their monks as lords apart from God (*arbāban min dūna llāh*)”). When ‘Adī replied that, in spite of his wearing a cross, he had not actually worshipped any other god, Muḥammad retorted that ‘Adī had followed these gods in forbidding what God has allowed and allowing what God has forbidden and that this can be equated with worshipping them. Since ‘Adī threw away the cross after Muḥammad told him to and was clearly unaware that his wearing a cross could be equated with worshipping a different god, the Prophet did not call him a *kāfir*. This, Abū Baṣīr claims, is proof that *jahl* can even excuse sins that violate what al-Maqdisī calls the *aṣl al-tawḥīd*.⁶⁵

From the above, it is clear that Abū Baṣīr considers *jahl* as an excuse for *kufr* to be more widely applicable than al-Maqdisī does and distinguishes several situations in which people can be excused by their ignorance.⁶⁶ This does not mean that *jahl* is an excuse for everything. If people think they know better than the warnings they get from a messenger or consciously refuse to follow the latter’s advice, Abū Baṣīr believes they cannot justifiably claim ignorance as a reason to escape punishment.⁶⁷ On the whole, Abū Baṣīr’s rebuttal of al-Maqdisī’s critique of Ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz is stronger than the latter’s own “response”. This is underlined by al-Maqdisī’s subsequent letter to Abū Baṣīr, which only partly addresses the criticism levelled against him.

Al-Maqdisī’s Response to Abū Baṣīr

From al-Maqdisī’s response to Abū Baṣīr it becomes clear that most of the arguments for or against allowing *jahl* as an excuse for *kufr*, whether or not one has been reached by a messenger, have been mentioned. The rebuttal of Abū Baṣīr’s writings that al-Maqdisī offers in his letter to the former is therefore little more than a repetition of

⁶⁴ Ibid., 22.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 15–6.

⁶⁶ Id., *Al-‘udhr*, 129–47.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 73–86.

what he wrote earlier. He (rightly) denies Abū Baṣīr's claims that he does not allow any excuses for people who engage in acts of *kufr* and stresses that he is, in fact, very careful in applying *takfīr*. To prove this, al-Maqdisī quotes his own writings, stating that "the mistake of neglecting a thousand infidels is smaller than the mistake of shedding a cupping glass of the blood of a single Muslim (*miḥjamat min dam Muslim wāḥid*)".⁶⁸ He further points out that since all messengers and revelations that came before brought with them the message of *tawḥīd*, human beings cannot claim ignorance of this.⁶⁹

In trying to counter Abū Baṣīr's claim that he believes that sinners to whom no messenger was sent go to hell, al-Maqdisī explains that this is not true since he only believes those guilty of violating the *aṣl al-tawḥīd* are punished.⁷⁰ However, instead of defending his division of *tawḥīd* into a basic root (*aṣl*) and its detailed branches (*furū'*)—a division that Abū Baṣīr claims is unscriptural and therefore wrong—al-Maqdisī completely ignores Abū Baṣīr's criticism on this point. He simply repeats his belief that Qur'ānic verses like 36: 6 prove that people who violated the *aṣl al-tawḥīd* but to whom no messenger was sent may go to hell, a point on which other Jihādī-Salafī scholars disagree as well.⁷¹ He also reiterates his belief that people are born with *fiṭra* and are heirs to the *mīthāq* between God and Ādam and can therefore claim no ignorance of God's unity, again without going into Abū Baṣīr's criticism of this reasoning.⁷² The rest of his letter mostly consists of long quotations from some of his other writings that also do nothing to rebut Abū Baṣīr's arguments against him.⁷³

Considering the above, al-Maqdisī's letter to Abū Baṣīr does not constitute a very strong defence of his views and it is rather surprising that he does not address the latter's criticism more thoroughly. Apart from the examples mentioned above, this is most apparent in al-Maqdisī's almost complete lack of attention for the *ḥadīth* about 'Adī b. Ḥātim. Since Abū Baṣīr uses this tradition to show that even a

⁶⁸ Al-Maqdisī, *Risāla li-l-shaykh*, 1–2. The quote is on 2.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 3.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 2.

⁷¹ See for example al-Khālīdī, *Al-tibyān*, 20–1, 24, 26; 'Alī b. Khudāyir al-Khudāyir, *Mā ḥukm man waṣalathu risālat al-Islām mushawwaha fa-lam yuslim?*, www.tawhed.ws/c?i=245 (accessed 8 October, 2009), n.d.

⁷² Al-Maqdisī, *Al-risāla li-l-shaykh*, 3–4.

⁷³ Ibid., 6–13.

violation of the *aṣl al-tawḥīd* may be excused by *jahl*—thereby challenging al-Maḳdisī's most important assumption—one would expect al-Maḳdisī to put some effort into rebutting this claim. Although al-Maḳdisī does mention the *ḥadīth* once in his letter for a different reason,⁷⁴ the fact that he leaves this claim unanswered probably has to do with not wanting to challenge or twist the Prophet's words and, perhaps more importantly, his desire to use parts of this *ḥadīth* and the Qur'ānic verse mentioned in it for his own purposes, as we will see later on.

Abū Baṣīr's Response to al-Maḳdisī's Letter

In the final contribution to the debate between the three scholars, Abū Baṣīr actually concentrates mostly on a different treatise by al-Maḳdisī. He does, however, spend a few pages replying to al-Maḳdisī's letter but does not mention the story of 'Adī either. He mostly concentrates on repeating his earlier arguments⁷⁵ but adds the novel idea that people are not naturally aware of God's *tawḥīd* and claims that this is apparent in today's world: "[Nowadays] people [...] do not know a thing about Islam, the Qur'ān or the Prophet [...]", Abū Baṣīr writes.⁷⁶

The argument that many of today's people are ignorant of Islam is probably not disputed by al-Maḳdisī. His emphasis on *fiṭra*, mankind's *mīthāq* with God and being born as *ḥunafā'*, however, is not countered by Abū Baṣīr's claim that people do not know anything about Islam. Al-Maḳdisī is concerned with people's natural instincts and inclinations, not with their intellectual knowledge. Moreover, if Abū Baṣīr claims that even today, after the coming of Muḥammad and the Qur'ān and with literature on Islam so widely available, people are ignorant of Islam, he seems to suggest either that *fiṭra*, *mīthāq* and being *ḥunafā'* do not mean much in practice or that people need another messenger to be held accountable for their sins. The first suggestion would clash with his own interpretation of several verses of the Qur'ān and *aḥādīth*; the second would implicitly challenge the notion of Muḥammad being the "seal of the prophets" (*khātim al-anbiyā'*). Since both are presumably unacceptable to Abū Baṣīr, one can perhaps conclude that this argument was not entirely thought through.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 10.

⁷⁵ Al-Tartūsī, *Taṣwībātunā*, 9–11.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 11.

The discussion about *jahl* as an obstacle to *takfīr* and as an excuse for *kufr* that we have seen so far seems highly theoretical. The question of whether anyone is punished by God on earth or in the hereafter is not a practical issue that human beings can have any influence on and it therefore seems to have little relevance beyond the strictly theological sphere. As mentioned above, however, many Jihādī-Salafī scholars tend to treat the discussion on punishment in the hereafter as a debate about *takfīr* on earth. This is not so much apparent in Ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz’s book but it is clear in the writings of al-Maqdisī and Abū Baṣīr, as we will see below. More concretely, their application of this discussion to modern-day politics seems to explain why this topic is so important to them: it is inherently tied up with their desire to apply *takfīr* to the rulers of Muslim countries and their political systems, an important tenet of Jihādī-Salafism.

The Political Relevance of al-‘udhr bi-l-jahl

Al-Maqdisī’s Political Application of al-‘udhr bi-l-jahl

In his writings on this issue, al-Maqdisī applies his opposition to using *jahl* as an excuse for *kufr* to two different aspects of politics: the rulers of Muslim countries and democracy. Concerning the former, he cites Q. 9: 31 (“They have taken their rabbis and their monks as lords apart from God [...]”), which he says refers to Jews’ and Christians’ desire to follow their own religious rules, in order to equate adhering to a legislative system other than Islamic law with taking other “lords”. Since there is only one true Lord (*rabb*), taking others instead of Him is clear polytheism, al-Maqdisī contends.⁷⁷ He further supports this view by quoting the *ḥadīth* about ‘Adī b. Ḥātim that Abū Baṣīr also uses. Al-Maqdisī stresses that Muḥammad, with reference to Q. 9: 31, points out to ‘Adī that being obedient to non-Islamic rules equals worship of other gods. This way, al-Maqdisī stretches the meaning of worship of other gods so as to include un-Islamic legislation. This allows him to claim that anyone who follows un-Islamic legislation is, in fact, guilty

⁷⁷ This argument was used before by Sayyid Qutb. See his *Ma‘ālim fi l-ṭarīq*, www.tawhed.ws/r?i=mf0etkyq (accessed 27 October, 2009), n.d., 82.

of worshipping other “lords”. Since that is a clear act of polytheism, it is a violation of the *aṣl al-tawḥīd*.⁷⁸

Because of this reasoning, al-Maqdisī claims that the rulers of Muslim countries, none of whom supposedly govern entirely according to Islamic law, are all guilty of violating the *aṣl al-tawḥīd*. He therefore does not just apply *takfīr* to them but, because they create laws and thus take God’s place as the sole legislator, he also accuses them of behaving like gods themselves. This is why he mostly refers to them as “idols” (*ṭawāghīt*) throughout his writings. Al-Maqdisī believes the rulers cannot claim to be ignorant about the impermissibility of “ruling according to something other than what God has revealed” (*ḥukm bi-ghayr mā anzala llāh*) because that is part of the *aṣl al-tawḥīd*. Since they—like all people—were created as *ḥunafāʾ* with *fiṭra* and as heirs to the *mīthāq* between God and Ādam, they have a natural inclination towards *tawḥīd* and therefore cannot possibly claim *jahl* as an excuse for their *kufr*.⁷⁹ Moreover, al-Maqdisī states that they also cannot use *jahl* to account for their un-Islamic rule because God has sent them His revelations through the final and most important messenger of all: Muḥammad. In other words, if they are not aware of the message of Islam, it is because they chose to ignore it, not because no messengers have been sent to them.⁸⁰

The latter argument—that modern-day rulers have the entire message of Islam at their disposal—seems to be the major difference between them, for whom *jahl* cannot be an excuse for *kufr*, and ‘Adī b. Ḥātim, who was excused by Muḥammad. Whereas ‘Adī could honestly claim ignorance of certain matters since Islam was still in its infancy, this obviously does not apply to today’s reality. Al-Maqdisī’s argument also shows exactly why he refrained from using ‘Adī’s story in his rebuttal of Abū Baṣīr’s criticism we saw earlier. If al-Maqdisī had decided to confront Abū Baṣīr about his interpretation of this *ḥadīth*, he would have had two options. Al-Maqdisī could either have analysed the entire text of the *ḥadīth* or he simply could have denied the connection between following rules and polytheism. The former would have forced him to include into his argument that Muḥammad excused ‘Adī’s act of *shirk* because of the latter’s *jahl*, which in turn

⁷⁸ Al-Maqdisī, *Kashf*, 34, 37.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 33, 37–8.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 34–6, 37.

would have forced him to admit that he was wrong in stating that a violation of the *aṣl al-tawḥīd* could not be excused; the latter option, however, would not only have been difficult considering the rather unambiguous wording of the *ḥadīth* but would also have destroyed his own argument in favour of *takfīr* of the rulers since they would no longer be guilty of polytheism on account of their application of un-Islamic rules. Obviously, neither option is particularly attractive to al-Maqdisī and in his reasoning for *takfīr* of the rulers of Muslim countries, he therefore conveniently leaves out that part of the *ḥadīth* where the Prophet excuses ‘Adī.

The second aspect of politics to which al-Maqdisī applies his opposition to using *jahl* as an excuse for *kufr* is democracy. Because of al-Maqdisī’s view that God’s *tawḥīd* includes His sole sovereignty as a legislator, he not only condemns man-made laws (*qawānīn waḍ’iyya*)⁸¹ drawn up by the rulers of Muslim countries but also legislation that does not have the *sharī’a* but “the people” as its ultimate source. Since only God can be the source of legislation, using “the people” for this purpose is tantamount to using them as a god, similar to what we saw above. Considering the fact that al-Maqdisī sees “the people” as democracy’s god, it is not surprising that he refers to this system as a religion.⁸²

Not surprisingly, al-Maqdisī applies *takfīr* to the legislators in government and parliament working on behalf of “the people” and quotes Q. 9: 31 again to support his case.⁸³ Where does this reasoning leave ordinary voters, however? Are all of them *kuffār* for participating in an electoral system that leads to *shirk* and thus a violation of the *aṣl al-tawḥīd*? In principle, al-Maqdisī believes that participating in elections is an act of *kufr* (*‘amal kufri*) but this does not mean that he applies *takfīr* to all voters. He acknowledges that some people only participate in voting for certain candidates so that these can represent their specific interests, not to support a non-Islamic system of legislation.⁸⁴ Moreover, al-Maqdisī states that when dealing with voters, the various

⁸¹ The term *qawānīn waḍ’iyya* could also be translated as “positive law” but this is not what is meant by the authors cited in this paper. Moreover, Salafi publications in English also translate *qawānīn waḍ’iyya* as “man-made laws”.

⁸² For an extensive overview of his arguments against democracy, see his book *Al-dimuqrāṭiyya dīn*, www.tawhed.ws/t (accessed 27 October, 2009), n.d.

⁸³ Al-Maqdisī, *Hādhihi ‘aqīdatunā*, www.tawhed.ws/t (accessed 27 October, 2009), 1997, 26.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 26–7.

objections to *takfīr* have to be taken into account. Al-Maqdisī excuses voters for participating in elections and refrains from calling them *kuffār* by referring to several objections to *takfīr*, like the making of a mistake (*khaṭʾ*) or people's unintended (*intifāʾ al-qaṣd*) contributions to a sinful system. Significantly, however, al-Maqdisī does not excuse people's participation in elections by using *jahl*.⁸⁵ Although he does not state the reason for this, it is obvious that his belief that man-made legislation is a violation of the *aṣl al-tawḥīd*, for which no *jahl* can be claimed, is behind this decision.

Al-Maqdisī's first point in his application of *al-ʿudhr bi-l-jahl* to politics is uncontroversial among Jihādī-Salafis. The belief that the rulers of Muslim countries are infidels who need to be fought by means of jihad is one of the central tenets of Jihādī-Salafism, although other scholars may argue for this option in different ways. Some scholars besides al-Maqdisī have even incorporated their refusal to accept *jahl* as an excuse for modern-day Muslim rulers into their work.⁸⁶ Al-Maqdisī's second point—about democracy—is not very controversial among Jihādī-Salafis either, although he was criticised for it by, once again, Abū Baṣīr.

Abū Baṣīr's "defence" of Democracy

Although Abū Baṣīr is no staunch supporter of democracy himself, he does defend some of its practices in his short response to al-Maqdisī's criticism of that system. He advises al-Maqdisī not to speak of "democracy" when he applies *takfīr* to its adherents but of "democracy in its Western *kufṛ* understanding" (*bi-maṣḥūmihā al-gharbī al-kufṛī*). His reasons for this are that most Muslims simply see democracy as a synonym for "freedom" (*al-ḥurriyya*) or "fighting injustice and dictatorship" (*muḥārabat al-ẓulm wa-l-diktātūriyya*) and that even a scholar such as Shaykh al-Azhar ʿAlī al-Ṭaṭṭāwī believes the second caliph ʿUmar to have had a sense of democracy. If even a great scholar like al-Ṭaṭṭāwī says positive things about democracy, Abū Baṣīr states, how can one possibly blame other people less knowledgeable than he for doing so? Abū Baṣīr therefore categorically rejects *takfīr* of people

⁸⁵ Id., *Risāla li-l-shaykh*, 2.

⁸⁶ See for instance al-Majlisī, *Al-radd*.

who support democracy, presumably excluding those who are actually involved in “un-Islamic” legislation.⁸⁷

The point of Abū Baṣīr’s argument seems to be that al-Maḳḍisī’s willingness to use several objections to *takfīr* of voters, but not *jahl*—even though many people are clearly ignorant about the true and “un-Islamic” nature of democracy—is wrong and he advises al-Maḳḍisī to take a more forceful stand against *takfīr* of those who vote in elections. He underlines this by pointing out what the consequences of al-Maḳḍisī’s equivocal views could be, namely that “many rash youngsters” (*kathīran min al-shabāb al-mutasarri*) may use his less than straightforward arguments to justify *takfīr* against any voter. He further mentions that if people who are elected are *kuffār*, as al-Maḳḍisī states, what does that make famous Islamist thinkers and activists such as Abū l-A‘lā Mawḍūdī, Ḥasan al-Bannā and ‘Alī Bilḥāj, all of whom favoured participation in elections?⁸⁸

Abū Baṣīr’s last contribution to this debate shows that, just as in his criticism of al-Maḳḍisī’s ideas on *al-‘udhr bi-l-jahl* in general, he does not agree with his fellow scholar’s views on democracy and voters and that *jahl* as an obstacle to *takfīr* should, in his opinion, be interpreted more widely than al-Maḳḍisī does. Although in the end, both scholars are generally quite close to each other in their views and agree that present-day Muslim rulers are *kuffār* and that democracy is a system of *kufr*, their debates and disagreements about several important details shows that a lot more thought goes into the application of *takfīr* than their reputation as reckless “takfiris” suggests.

Conclusion

This paper has given a detailed analysis of a debate between three Jihādī-Salafī scholars on the question of *al-‘udhr bi-l-jahl*: When can a person be excused for committing a sin by pointing to his ignorance (*jahl*)? The debate showed that all three scholars were generally close to one another in their ideas but differed quite a lot on some of the detailed issues in this discussion. The most important of these issues are whether human beings are naturally aware of and inclined towards God’s absolute monotheism (*tawḥīd*); whether *jahl* is ever a possible

⁸⁷ Abū Baṣīr, *Taṣwībātunā*, 3.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 3–5.

excuse for violations of this principle of *tawhīd*; and whether God always sends messengers to warn people about their sins before punishing them. With regard to politics, the debate focussed on whether or not people were ignorant of the sinful nature of democracy.

Besides offering a unique insight into a Jihādī-Salafī debate on *takfīr*, this chapter makes two things very clear. Firstly, it shows that Jihādī-Salafis' reputation as reckless dispensers of *takfīr* who do not put much thought into their judgement of other Muslims should be qualified somewhat. To be sure, their use of *takfīr* is indeed radical, anti-establishment and quite often leads to violence and this chapter is by no means an attempt to diminish the gravity of this. The idea, however, that Jihādī-Salafis simply apply *takfīr* to anyone who disagrees with them, as some of the hits on Google referred to at the beginning of this chapter seem to suggest, is exaggerated. This chapter has shown that applying *takfīr* is not a reckless undertaking and is accompanied by some highly detailed reasoning. Secondly, the diverse use of the sources by several Jihādī-Salafī scholars shows that even among like-minded '*ulamā*', the Qur'ān and the Sunna simply do not speak for themselves. The fact that radical ideologues whose ideas are generally so alike can come up with sometimes diametrically opposed conclusions based on the same texts is therefore a clear indication of the dynamics of the scriptural sources of Islam.

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